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Intercultural adaptation as a shared learning process in the life-course

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Abstract – Workplaces and societies all over the world are becoming more and more culturally diverse. Many people are regularly in their life-course in contact with someone who has a different cultural background and they are facing new challenges in their everyday communication. To better cope with the situation one needs a deeper understanding of the processes of intercultural adaptation, intercultural communication and intercultural learning. Dialectical adaptation models see adaptation as a two-way process where interactions change both parties. In intercultural communication situations cultural, sociocultural, psychocultural and environmental factors exert influences. They influence what is learned from the information, how the communication situation is interpreted, and what kinds of evaluations are made. Intercultural interactions are a crucial part of intercultural learning and understanding. New dialogical competencies are needed. A situated learning model in intercultural adaptation gives opportunities to practise them and increase their understanding of the meanings. Through shared experiences people can increase cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity and feel comfortable in multicultural contexts. The present article gives an overview of the theoretical concepts in intercultural adaptation and learning.

Keywords: intercultural communication, cross-cultural awareness, intercultural adaptation, intercultural learning, experiential learning, situated learning

Introduction

In today's world people from different cultures migrate to or sojourn in different cultures to work, study and live during their life-time. For example, students all over the world are participating in various exchange programmes and they have to adapt to a new cultural environment. It is important to know what kind of challenges they face and how they learn new cultural practices.

Culture is often considered the core concept in intercultural communication and adaptation. Culture is a very complex concept and it has been defined in many ways. Keesing's (1974) definition of culture is communicative. It emphasizes that culture provides us with a system of knowledge that allows us to know how to communicate with others and how to interpret others' behaviour. Members of the culture do not share all aspects of their culture, but they share the "broad design" and sufficient "deeper principles" so that they can communicate with each other with relative ease.

Jensen (2005, pp. 1-2) talks about the 'complex concept of culture' in the field of intercultural communication. She illustrates the 'complex concept of culture' with the following statements:

- Culture is common knowledge and meaning shared with others
- Culture is something we do
- Culture is constantly being recreated over and over again and it is constructed between people
- A culture cannot be seen as being homogeneous, but must be seen as being divided up into different spaces, each of which contain different values and meanings.
- Each individual can participate in many different social categories and should therefore not only be portrayed as a national category, but also in categories such as gender, education, social background, age etc.

Chen and Starosta (1998, pp. 26-27) talk about four basic characteristics of culture. Culture is holistic, learned, dynamic and pervasive. First, as a holistic system, culture can be broken down into several subsystems (education, religion etc.), but the various aspects of culture are closely interrelated. Any change in a subsystem will affect the whole system. Second, culture is learned consciously and unconsciously in early life through the process of socialization and enculturation. Third, culture is dynamic. Cultures are constantly changing over time and one of the reasons is cultural contact, and finally, culture is pervasive and spreads to every aspect of our lives and influences the way we think, the way we talk and the way we behave.

Hofstede (1997, p. 201) notes that when people work in multicultural environments they have to change their own behavioural practices to which they were socialised and interpersonal relationships have to be renegotiated. People face new challenges in their everyday communication and they have to learn new ways of communicating. Berger (2001, pp. xi-xii) calls the challenge facing all of us pluralism, meaning that people with very different beliefs, values and lifestyles are forced to interact with each other, and therefore either run into conflict or somehow accommodate each other's differences. Hence, people have to become aware of those differences and eventually start to accept and respect them.

Intercultural communication subsumes many different factors which influence in intercultural interactions. Gudykunst (1997), Jensen (2003), while many other scholars have identified "filters" which communicators bring to the communication situation. In a new cultural environment those "filters" are most probably different and may cause misunderstandings and delay the adaptation process. Many researchers (e.g. Bennett, 1986; Bennett, 1993; Paige, 1993; Hanvey, 2004) claim, however, that a very important factor predicting adaptation to a new culture is how much one participates in communication in a new cultural milieu. Intercultural interaction increases opportunities for intercultural learning and understanding.

The process of adaptation can be seen from different viewpoints. There is a long tradition of perceiving adaptation as a problematic process. Some scholars, on the other hand, see it mainly as a learning process. When scholars emphasise the learning perspective of adaptation, they also stress shared responsibility. In intercultural communication situations all communicators affect each other and most probably all of them have to adapt to some extent.

The present article gives a theoretical overview of the concepts of the intercultural adaptation process. The structure of this article is as follows. The first section gives an introduction to the topic and definitions of culture. The second section will provide a brief overview of the models of adapting to a new culture. The third section will discuss about the factors affecting an intercultural communication situation. The fourth section explains the domains of intercultural learning, introduces the sociocultural model of learning and models of enhancing intercultural awareness and sensitivity.

Intercultural Adaptation

Intercultural adaptation is a long-term process, which varies with each individual. Kim (1989) defines intercultural adaptation as a process to increase the level of fitness to meet the demands of the new cultural environment. According to Martin and Nakayama (2000) most scholars agree that cultural adaptation is similar to the other transition processes in life (e.g., new job, new place to live, studies in a big city). Cultural adaptation has traditionally (Furnham and Bohner 1986; Ellingsworth 1988; Kim 1989) been seen as a responsibility of a newcomer. Dialectical models (e.g. Anderson, 1994), on the other hand, see adaptation as a two-way process, where interaction is seen as involving mutual adaptation. Kim (2001) notes that the process of adapting to a new cultural context can produce a feeling of loss

of cultural identity for some people and stimulate personal growth for others. Turner, Hogg, Oakes and Reicher (1987) also note that individuals have a multiplicity of personal and social identities that are not fixed or static but dynamic, fluid and situation specific.

Over the years the main emphasis has been the problematic nature of cross-cultural adaptation. Kim (2001, pp. 17-19) states that this problem-based view of cross-cultural adaptation is most apparent in studies of culture shock. Many scholars (e.g. Lysgaard 1955; Oberg 1960; Adler, 1981; Kim, 1989; 1991) have identified stages in the intercultural adaptation process. The most popular developmental models of intercultural adaptation are U curve and W curve models. The process in the U curve model contains high affect in the beginning, followed by a drop in satisfaction, ending with recovery. The stages of intercultural adaptation have many different names, such as honeymoon, crisis, adjustment, and bicultural periods (Kim, 2001). Peter Adler (1975) names transitional phases like contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy and independence. The W curve model also explains the stress of returning home. When people return their home countries they may face a similar process of adaptation to their own cultures (Gullahorn and Gullahorn 1963).

In sharp contrast to culture-shock models is the work of researchers who emphasise the learning and growth-facilitating nature of the adaptation process (Kim 2001, 17-19). The dialectical model of intercultural adaptation (Anderson 1994) argues that intercultural adaptation is a cyclical and recursive process in which people try to solve problems and overcome obstacles embedded in the interaction with the host culture. How a person responds in the intercultural adaptation process, creates his or her own adjustment patterns. Adapting to a new culture can lead to fundamental change which may feel like “rebirth” (Anderson, 1994). The dialectical model of intercultural adaptation is composed of six principles:

- 1) Intercultural adaptation is motivated, goal-oriented process in which sojourners learn to accommodate to the new culture.
- 2) Intercultural adaptation and learning processes are reciprocal and interdependent.
- 3) Intercultural adaptation implies a stranger-host relationship, where thinking and behavioural patterns have to be modified to fit the frame of reference of the host culture.
- 4) Intercultural adaptation is a cyclical, continuous, and interactive process, where the new culture influences and changes the person, but at the same time the person influences and changes the environment.
- 5) Intercultural adaptation is an ongoing process.
- 6) Intercultural adaptation implies personal development.

The dialectical model describes about two-way learning processes. Both parties are involved and both parties will adapt. The trend in cross-cultural adaptation discourse has been toward an increasing pluralism, emphasizing the importance of ethnicity maintenance (Kim, 2001; Berger, 2001). Maintaining the ethnic, gender or professional identities can be a challenging task. For example, Woods (2004, p. 216) talks about women in Canada who maintained strong ties with their home country but in developing their professional or Canadian identities, they did not feel fitting as easily in their home countries. Woods (2004, p. 219) also notes that the complexity of social identifications and identities shift and change over time and place. Ethier and Deaux (1994, in Woods 2004) note that in a year students developed new supports for their ethnic identity in the university environment.

Intercultural Communication

By intercultural communication Hall (1959) refers to the interaction between or among individuals with differing cultural backgrounds. Hall also defines “culture as communication”, which implies that culture is the creation of meaning. Many scholars emphasize that communication is at the heart of intercultural adaptation process. When we are communicating with someone from another culture our behavioural practices affect each other.

Gudykunst and Kim (1997, pp. 35-47) define intercultural communication as “the interaction of meanings being differently generated”. They talk about “conceptual filters” which people have to be aware of because “without understanding the other person’s filters, we cannot accurately interpret or predict his or her behaviour”. They present the intercultural communication model (Fig. 1) with four “conceptual filters”. The encoding and decoding of communication messages is an interactive process influenced by cultural, sociocultural, psychocultural, and environmental factors. In the model circles are drawn with broken lines to indicate that the elements affect, and are affected by, the other elements. Communication between people takes place in a social environment that includes other people who themselves engage in communication, and these environmental factors influence the communication interaction.

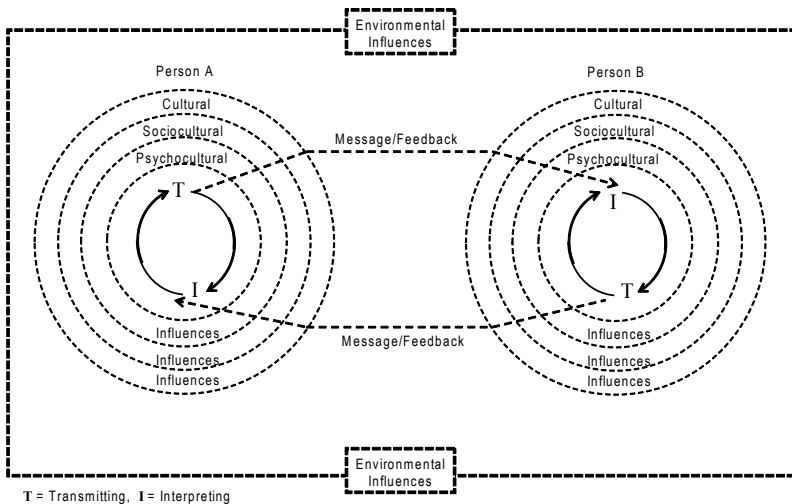


Figure 1. An organizing model for studying communication with strangers (Gudykunst & Kim 1997, 45)

Jensen (2003) notes that the intercultural communication model by Gudykunst and Kim (1997) is a very important step towards describing the intercultural communication process as a dialogical process because communicators are simultaneously both senders and receivers of messages. Another model which emphasizes the dialogical process of intercultural communication is Yoshikawa's (1987) double-swing model of intercultural communication (Fig. 2). In the double-swing model communication is seen as an infinite process and the two participants will both change in the interaction. The model emphasises the duality between 'you and I' in a communication situation meaning that two realities are "complementary and constantly in interaction"



Figure 2. The Double-Swing Model (Yoshikawa 1987)

Yoshikawa (1987) underlines that the goal of communication is not to eliminate differences, but to use the dynamics that arise through the interaction. According to Jensen (2003, pp. 4–5) the model seeks to a) give a description of an intercultural communication process between two actors, who are both senders and addressees, b) to emphasize the inter-connectedness between the participants in the communication process, and c) to show that the communication process is an infinite, ongoing process.

Chen and Starosta (1998, pp. 28–29) explain Guan's theory of intercultural communication. In the theory there are three potential forms of intercultural communication, depending on the interactants' intentions: self-centred dialogue, dominant dialogue or equal dialogue. The **self-centred dialogue** takes the form of ethnocentrism. In this kind of intercultural communication A and B use their own cultural standards to assess and interact with each other, and they both lack cultural understanding. In **dominant dialogue**, A is well aware of B's cultural traits and differences, and uses this advantage to control B to achieve personal goals. **Equal dialogue** between A and B represents an ideal form of intercultural communication. Chen (2008, p. 2) continues that intercultural communication requires individuals to develop a harmonious relationship between communicators in a continuously transforming process of mutual dependency. Such intercultural communication is based on mutual understanding of cultural similarities and differences. Both parties make sincere and empathetic efforts to overcome their differences on an equal basis.

In intercultural communication situations there are many possibilities for misunderstandings and erroneous conclusions. When

people decode the messages, interpretation depends on what the other person communicates verbally and nonverbally. The context in which the message is received likewise plays an important role. Through perception people receive and select the information they think they need. Through the interpretation process people assign meanings and explanations for the other's behaviour.

Attribution theory (Heider, 1958) assumes that people try to determine why someone acts as they do. Heider notes that all behaviour is determined by either internal (factor within the person) or external factors (beyond one's own control), and evaluation of the behaviour is based on those attributions. What kinds of attributions one uses determines the direction of future behaviour. For example, if a person interprets the behaviour of the partner as desirable, s/he will evaluate it more favourably than if s/he thinks it is due to the internal factors than if attributing it to external factors. If the behaviour is not desirable, the evaluations are more negative if one attributes it to internal factors than to external factors. When people attribute the behaviour of another person, it affects the way they evaluate the situation and act in subsequent interactions.

Intercultural Learning

When people meet and interact with each other the intercultural learning process begins. Paige (1993) defines intercultural learning as a dynamic, developmental, and ongoing process involved in communicating and interacting effectively with individuals from other cultural backgrounds and in culturally diverse settings. Scholars (e.g. Adler, 1975; 1977; Paige, 1993; Hanvey, 2004) have focused on either cognitive aspects of the adaptation process – various learning outcomes of adaptation, like self-awareness and cultural awareness, or on behavioural processes – how the migrant's interaction with the

environment influences adaptation (e. g. Furnham and Bohner 1986; Woods, 2004). Paige (1993, pp.1–3) points out that the intercultural learning process entails cognitive, behavioural, and affective domains of learning, and includes “highly personalized behavioural and affective learning, self-reflection, and direct experience with cultural difference”. Hence, intercultural communication experiences play a decisive role in the intercultural learning and adaptation process.

Learning and adaptation is not a one-way process but a shared learning process. The problem of dialogue between different cultural groups becomes critical. In the social constructionist theory of Berger and Luckman (1966) the relationship between individuals and society (culture) is viewed as dialectical, where each person is dependent on the other and both parties learn. Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural learning model claims that learning and development take place in socially and culturally shaped contexts. John-Steiner and Mahn (2009, pp. 2–7) continue that in sociocultural learning theory the development is seen as the transformation of socially shared activities into internalised processes.

The mutual learning model by Argyris and Schön (1978) is based on cooperation and respect. People involved in a communication situation want to know what the other person thinks because they believe that they can achieve a better outcome if they work together and learn from each other. The mutual learning model raises an individual’s sense of satisfaction. Kofman (2003) says that when people apply the mutual learning model, the prevailing principles are curiosity, transparency and joint accountability. In a mutual learning process both parties accept that the other’s views may be as valid as their own and can help to solve the problem. Every problem or error is an opportunity to learn. The mutual learning process has consequences for both behaviour and learning. People can behave without fear, interpersonal relationships become more facilitative, and people feel free to explore and search for new information and new alternatives. The relationships are based on integrity, commitment and dignity.

Such an approach is needed in the intercultural communication situation. Through intercultural interactions we can analyse our behaviour and at the same time understand the other person better. Experiences can widen our perspectives of the world, and create a culture of openness.

Learning takes place effectively when people act in the real world. Dewey (1938) pointed out that experiences cannot automatically be equated with learning. Experience may distort educational growth if the process lacks continuity and interaction. For example, prejudices and stereotypes are the results of experiences which have been misinterpreted. Hanvey (2004, p. 8), in his essay “An Attainable Global Perspective”, also points out that contact between societies does not lead to understanding if people see the other partner’s behaviour through their own cultural lenses.

Knowledge and practice tend to work together (Samovar and Porter, 2000, p. 372). Personal contact and experience are the most desirable methods for intercultural learning. Experiential learning theories (Dewey, 1938; Kolb and Fry, 1975; Kolb 1984) are connected to the constructionist learning approach, which proposes that learning is an active process where learners actively construct mental models and theories of the world around them. According to Kolb (1984), experiential learning focuses on the individuals’ learning process, relates to the meaning making process of the experience, and emphasises that knowledge is gained through experiences.

Lave and Wenger (1991) talk about the situated learning theory which draws on Vygotsky’s activity theory of social cognition for a conception of social knowledge that conceives learning as a transaction between the person and the social environment. Situations are embedded in communities of practice that have history, norms, tools and traditions of practice. Learning is thus a process of becoming a member of a community of practice through legitimate peripheral participation (e.g. Erasmus Mundus students in foreign countries). Situated learning enriches the learning space concept by stressing

that learning extends beyond institutional formal settings. When people do not know how to act, they depend on others with more experience and over time, take on increasing responsibility for their own learning and participation in joint activities. For example, children become skilled practitioners in the specific cognitive activities in their community by observing, participating and repeating the experiences. Learners participate in a wide variety of joint activities which provide the opportunity for synthesising the influences into the learner's new modes of understanding and participation. (Lave and Wenger, 1991.)

Many models (e.g. Bennett, 1986; Hanvey, 2004) have illustrated the different stages in increasing intercultural awareness and understanding. Bennett (1993, p. 116) notes that even if these developmental models were originally not all connected to adaptation they can be used to account for some of the processes. Hanvey's and Bennett's models below emphasise intercultural contact as a leading factor in intercultural understanding and adaptation.

Hanvey's (2004) model of cross-cultural awareness proposes four levels of cross-cultural awareness. On the first level a person is aware of superficial and very obvious cultural traits. This kind of awareness is gained, for example, through tourist trips or from textbooks. Intercultural interactions are very limited on that level. The interpretation of the different behaviour is, for example, implausible, exotic, strange, interesting or bizarre. On the second level people become aware of both significant and subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with their own cultural practices. Such cross-cultural awareness is gained in culture conflict situations which are interpreted as unbelievable, frustrating or irrational. On level three people are aware of significant and subtle cultural traits, but they accept these intellectually – analysing them in a wider frame of reference. It is believable and makes sense to them. On the fourth level people become aware of how another culture feels from the standpoint of an insider. This is plausible because of subjective familiarity – living the culture. (Hanvey, 2004.)

Bennett's (1986) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity shows the developmental process in which people transform themselves from an ethnocentric state to an ethnorelative state. The process includes six stages:

- 1) Denial: People deny the existence of cultural differences
- 2) Defence: People attempt to protect their own worldview to counter the perceived threat of cultural difference
- 3) Minimization: People attempt to protect the core of their own worldview by concealing differences in the shadow of cultural similarities
- 4) Acceptance: People begin to accept the existence of behavioural differences and underlying cultural differences
- 5) Adaptation: People become emphatic toward cultural differences and become bicultural or multicultural, and
- 6) Integration: People apply ethnorelativism to their own identity and can experience difference as an essential and joyful aspect of all life.

These two models serve as examples of the cognitive and behavioural domains of learning. Martin and Nakayama (2000, p. 317) also ask what kinds of things people have to know and what kind of behaviour they should use to become the most competent communicators. They emphasise the importance of an affective domain of learning by asking what kinds of attitudes people should have, and what kind of motivation people need to have to be good intercultural communicators. Many studies (e.g., Martin and Hammer, 1989; Spitzberg and Cubach, 1989; Chen and Starosta, 1996) have produced lists of basic components of intercultural communication competence, such as having respect for others. Motivation seems to be the force that moves people to reach the goal of intercultural adaptation. Without motivation, the process of intercultural adaptation will impede the ability to act in an appropriate way (Kim 2001, pp. 17–18).

Conclusions

Many people all over the world are going through the process of adapting to new circumstances and facing new challenges because of their work or studies. The main purpose of this article has been to talk about the concepts of intercultural adaptation and learning. The main goal has been to emphasise the sociocultural learning model as a suitable learning model in the adaptation process.

Adapting to a new culture is a complex and dynamic process. Very often people assume that it is the newcomer's responsibility to adapt. However, in many studies it has been proved that the intercultural adaptation and learning process is most effective when both parties are involved. The intercultural learning process includes cognitive, behavioural and affective domains of learning. Researchers claim that even if we understand the concepts of intercultural communication we have to put theories into practice because intercultural interactions are a crucial part of the intercultural learning process. The situated learning theory in particular could provide a new perspective on intercultural adaptation, learning and understanding. When learners participate in joint activities they have opportunities to use many ways of learning strategies and create new modes of understanding and participation. Through interaction people can enhance new options for intercultural learning and adaptation.

However, the process of adapting to a new culture requires "learners" to become emotionally flexible in responding to the challenges and frustrations of cultural adaptation (Paige 1993, p. 1). Matsumoto et al. (2006) report both positive and negative adaptation outcomes. On the one hand the positive consequences include gains in language competence, self-confidence, positive mood, interpersonal relationships and stress reduction. On the other hand, the negative consequences include psychological and psychosomatic concern, like depression, anxiety, impaired school and work performance, and difficulties in human relationships.

To achieve positive outcomes people should use dialogical communication strategies in intercultural communication situations. Equal dialogue allows participants to create new meanings together and reach mutual understanding. In dialogue meaning is actually discovered between individuals rather than owned by each individual. Dialogical communication expands individual viewpoints and develops a sense of working together towards a new and wider understanding. If people would achieve multiple perspectives on the world around them, the intercultural adaptation would become a rich learning experience. It would be important for the investigations of the intercultural adaptation processes to continue and increase the interest in studies from the sociocultural learning perspective and to see intercultural adaptation as a situated, real-life learning experience. Hence, application of intercultural adaptation theories to real-life settings is critical in theory development and seeing the process of intercultural adaptation as shared learning process.

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